



The Importance of Puppy Socialisation

The old belief (that is unfortunately still being pushed by some), that puppies must be kept isolated until they have received all their vaccinations, can have disastrous results for puppies. These days, together with scientific understanding of the critical period of early social development in the dog and with improved vaccines, it is not only important to expose the puppy to the outside world at an early age, it is crucial! The famous American animal behaviourist, Shelby Marlo puts it nicely in her book "New Age of Training Dogs":

"Keeping the dog behind closed doors is the not panacea you think it to be. Unless this dog is living in a bubble, he will never be safe from exposure to disease. You can step in animal waste and inadvertently track it into your home on the soles of your shoes. In fact, isolating your young puppy from the world could foster more harm than good. If you don't socialise your puppy prior to three months of age, you run the very real risk of creating a fearful, antisocial dog.

By taking calculated risks like going to a puppy class where all participants are vaccinated and healthy, visiting friends who have healthy dogs; taking the puppy for drives in the car on errands; having puppy parties to which you invite acquaintances of all colours, sizes and ages, you will create a well-rounded confident adult dog that is worldly in his views of the human realm."

What is the "Critical Socialisation Period"?

The Critical Socialisation Period is the period of the first 16 weeks of the puppy's life. This is where puppies learn about the world around them, become familiar with things they are exposed to as well as certain experiences and situations presented to them. All dogs are born fearful of humans and other objects, it is only through early exposure and socialisation that puppies grow to become familiar and confident with these. Isolating puppies during this Critical Socialisation period, usually results in fearfulness and over-reactive tendencies. Fearful puppies may then grow up to be fearful dogs, which may growl and even bite to protect themselves from what they perceive as a threat. These perceived "threats" could be children, visitors, strangers, other dogs or animals, cars, lawnmowers, crowds, the list goes on and on!

In addition to this, there are some breeders who unfortunately only breed for looks and conformation of the dog rather than looking for stable nerves too; not to mention the number of puppy mills that mass produce puppies resulting in all sorts of temperaments that are dysfunctional. These puppies especially, if not properly socialised during the Critical Socialisation period, may end up quite fearful, aggressive and even dangerous around family members and strangers.

Start a training and socialisation program with your puppy at 8/9 weeks of age.

Early training and exposure is essential in the development of a confident and well behaved animal. Many responsible pet owners take their puppies to reputable training schools who offer well structured training and socialisation programs for puppies. You may wish to begin your puppy's training at a puppy pre-school conducted by your local vet where they will later point you in the direction of a reputable training centre. Whichever course you choose to take, you should definitely begin taking your puppy to school as soon as your pup reaches 8 weeks of age to ensure your dog grows up free of unnecessary fears.

Suggested places to socialise your pup

- Puppy preschools and/or dog obedience schools who offer puppy classes. These are normally run by qualified professionals who understand canine psychology as well teach you the basics of obedience training. Puppies mingle with one another in a safe and controlled environment.
- Shopping centre entrances! Sit just outside the entrance doors with your pup and watch the world go by. Patting by strangers is wonderful socialisation with the added bonus of exposure to shopping trolleys, cars and foot traffic.
- Puppy Parties: Get some of your friends together who also have young pups and organise a Puppy Party, but please ensure these are supervised and that all puppies have commenced their vaccination regimes.
- Car Rides: Many pups only ever go for a car ride when going to the vets, therefore it is no wonder the pup learns to hate the car ride. Take pup on as many errands as possible in the car. Use a travel crate or approved car harness if your pup tends to jump around.
- Train/Tram or bus rides: If the driver lets you on, get on with your pup and enjoy the scenery together.

Stay Away from

- Off leash parks: You don't know what sort of dogs frequent there and most importantly if they are vaccinated or not. Many young pups have been the victim of attacks at off-leash parks resulting in severe trauma and fear based behaviours.
- Well meaning friends with large, boisterous dogs and/or dogs with known aggression problems: You get the picture!!

☆ The decision to keep your pup isolated until he has had all of his vaccination is yours solely, however keep in mind that you can never reverse the effects of inadequate or incomplete puppy socialisation.

☆ Wherever you wish to take your dog as an adult, take it there as a puppy - but be prudent of course!!

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